

OLD DUXBURY SHIPS

By GERSHOM BRADFORD

A shipmate of my youth, Captain Edward Smith of Melrose, in his retired years, enjoyed browsing through old papers, ship reports and documents. Whenever he spotted the mention of a Duxbury ship or master, he sent it to me. From this collection it may be of interest to record a sampling of the activities of our vessels and their masters during the years 1821 and 1822. All the vessels mentioned below belonged in Duxbury and arrived at Boston, from ports of departure, on the dates given; the master follows the vessel's name:

1821

Brig Franklin, Hunt, 70 days, Trapani and Palermo, June 3
Sch. Selma and Jane, Drew, 90 days, Messina, June 19.
Sch. Catharine, Collins, 53 days, Alicanti, Spain, July.
Brig Favorite, Winsor, 58 days, Trieste, July 1.
Brig Margaret, Smith, 47 days, St Ubes, Portugal, July 4.
Brig Golden Grove, Thomas, 72 days, Leghorn, July 4.
Brig Eight Sons, Low, 34 days, Amsterdam, July 19.
Ship Minerva, Snow, 28 days, New Orleans, August 4.
Ship Admittance, Maglathlin, 34 days, New Orleans, Aug. 26.
Brig Messenger, Chandler, 81 days, Marsailles, Aug. 26.
Sch. Jubilee, Soule, 64 days, Gibraltar, Oct. 7.
Brig Wanderer, Sampson, 70 days, St. Petersburg, Nov. 7.
Sch. St Michaels, Simmons, 75 days, Leghorn and 56 days from Trapani, Sicily, Nov. 18.
Brig Argus, Drew, 64 days, Trieste, Dec. 17.

1822

Brig Fides, Soule, 57 days, Messina, Mar. 21.
Brig Duxbury, Drew, sailed flushing for Rochelle, France, Feb. 10; spoken in lat. 42° 30' N., Lg. 61° 00' W., on Apr. 20; arrived Boston, 38 days from Rochelle, Apr. 28.
Sch. Selma and Jane, Drew, 63 days, Rochelle, Apr. 12.
Brig Franklin, Weld, 27 days, Fayal, Azores, July 10.
Sch. Collector, Kendrick, 53 days, Malaga, July 19.
Brig Mayflower, Weston, 62 days, Amsterdam, Sept. 22.
Brig Spartan, Soule, 30 days, Lisbon, Oct. 1.
Brig Two Friends, Smith, 34 days, St Ubes, Oct. 2.
Brig Duxbury, Drew, 57 days, Lisbon, Dec. 14.

DUXBURY CLIPPER

Thursday, January 21, 1965

Only the surnames of the masters were given in the ship reports; this fact makes it awkward for descendants to identify their seafaring forebears.

It will be noted that brigs predominated Duxbury's foreign trading at this time. There was a large number of schooners - and some brigs - arriving from the West Indies, South America and our southern ports. This trade was brisk.

The length of voyages varied widely. This was due to the great range of weather, the sailing qualities of the vessel, her cargo trim, and the skill of the master, and it may be added, the daring of the master. The difference in the lengths of two similar passages is shown by the Selma and Jane taking 63 days from Rochelle, while later in the same month, the brig Duxbury made the same passage in 38 days. Each was commanded by one of the outstanding Drew family of our town.

To the modern traveler these long passages may be something of a surprise, but the seafarers endured much hardship and deprivation to achieve them. It took experience, toil and skill to gather the wind power make 5-6 knots. If the master averaged 100 miles a day he did not greatly complain, but when Captain Drew in the Selma and Jane took 90 days from Messina, a distance of roughly 4300 miles, she only averaged 50 miles a day. The Captain was no doubt quite frustrated.

That simple report that the brig Duxbury was "spoken" in Lat. 42° 30' N., Lg. 61° 00' W., (420 miles about due East from Cape Cod) reveals that these vessels laid a direct course to Boston. These routes would take them through belts of variable or westerly winds and accounts for the long passages. Later shipmasters learned the advantage of making a great swing to the southward in the fair trade winds. Although they sailed some 1100 miles farther than the direct route from, say, Gibraltar, smarter passages were made.

St Ubes, Portugal and Trapani, Sicily, so often mentioned in Duxbury's foreign commerce, were ports of call for salt. This commodity was extensively used in the cod fisheries, not all for New England consumption, but for cargoes out to the West Indies, South America and southern Europe. There was almost always a market for salt fish and it was not susceptible to deterioration, even in the Tropics. When a vessel in European ports could not find a homeward cargo she would go to St Ubes for a load of salt; it could always be used here.

The pay of the masters of the brigs at this time was \$30 to \$40 a month, but there were other sources of income. The captain probably owned 1/4 or perhaps 1/2 of the vessel; he received what was called "primage" - 2 1/2 to 5% of the profits of the voyage; he was allotted a certain number of cubic feet of cargo space in which he stowed his own speculations; and last in his cabin he brought concentrated, high-value goods to the extent he was willing to sacrifice his convenience in the crowded quarters.

So it will be seen that the masters of these vessels probably built their houses in Duxbury more from the profits of these sidelines than from their wares. At that it was a rough way to make a living, but there was a subtle lure to which they repeatedly responded, sometimes regretted it, yet responded again. However, when the anchor was safely down in Boston Harbor there was an exhilaration, not admitted openly, at having beaten down the many adverse elements, whether human or weather, that had harassed them along the way. It is for these men and these reasons that Duxbury is such an attractive place today.